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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [UN](#) [AF](#) [PK](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: INSECURITY DELAYS AFGHAN REFUGEE REPATRIATION FROM
PAKISTAN

Classified By: STACY NICHOLS, ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR, US EMBASSY KA
BUL, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary: UNHCR has suspended operations to assist Afghan refugees repatriate from Pakistan. Repatriation from Peshawar is suspended until at least April 1, pending an assessment that it is safe for UNHCR personnel and refugees to participate. Repatriation from Quetta is suspended indefinitely, linked to efforts to recover the head of UNHCR's Quetta sub-office, who was abducted February 2.

[¶2.](#) (U) In February UNHCR announced that its offices in Afghanistan and Pakistan would postpone assisted repatriation for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Repatriation operations were suspended for the winter at the end of October 2008, and UNHCR had planned to resume operations March 1. The February announcement said that the voluntary repatriation center (VRC) in Peshawar would not open until March 16, and the VRC in Quetta would remain closed until further notice.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) Note: Refugees "check out" of Pakistan at VRCs operated by UNHCR and the Government of Pakistan. The refugees-turned-returnees "check in" to Afghanistan at encashment centers operated by UNHCR and the Government of Afghanistan. Encashment centers are so called because returnees receive their repatriation and transportation stipends of nearly \$100 per person, plus a food allowance, during processing there. In 2008, 276,000 Afghan refugees used this process to return from Pakistan to Afghanistan. Returnees said that insecurity and inflation in Pakistan convinced them to move home, despite a dearth of jobs and services in Afghanistan. Assisted repatriation from Iran operates much differently. Suspending operations at Pakistan VRCs and Afghanistan encashment centers will have no impact on repatriation from Iran.

[¶4.](#) (C) In late February the Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees told Islamabad Refugee Affairs Specialist (RAS) that the delays were due to security concerns in Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan. On March 4 UNHCR Pakistan's assistant country representative Killian Kleinschmidt told Regional Refugee Coordinator that repatriation operations were suspended at the request of the Government of Pakistan. UNHCR Pakistan hoped to resume repatriation operations at the Peshawar VRC by mid-March.

[¶5.](#) (C) Kleinschmidt admitted that UNHCR remained severely shaken by the February 2 abduction of Quetta sub-office chief, Amcit John Solecki, and murder of his driver, Syed Hashim. The UNHCR Pakistan country representative and her deputy were working full-time to secure Solecki's release. UNHCR would not resume repatriation operations in Quetta until the Solecki case was resolved.

¶6. (C) On March 15 UNHCR Afghanistan Country Representative Ewen MacLeod advised Regional RefCoord and Kabul RAS that repatriation operations would not resume until April 1, at the earliest. MacLeod had sought assurances from UNHCR Pakistan that conditions between Peshawar and the Khyber Pass were safe enough to send returning refugees, their families, and their earthly possessions. He was dissatisfied with the response and did not want to create incentives for refugees to cross through an active counter-insurgency campaign.

¶7. (C) Conclusion: UNHCR's interest in assisting voluntary repatriation is tempered by concern about its staff's safety in Pakistan, and risks to returning refugees traveling to and through the Khyber Pass. UNHCR Pakistan remains shaken by the ongoing tragedy of the Solecki abduction. The delay puts would-be returnees in a quandary. Insecurity is likely to continue to push Afghan refugees from Pakistan, but repatriation subsidies create an incentive to remain until UNHCR resumes operations. We have been impressed by the refugee grapevine, however, and believe the refugees will obtain accurate enough intelligence to judge whether and when to return to Afghanistan.

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